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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL: A TALE OF THREE OUTLOOKS

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Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d.)

11. (C) Summary. In separate meetings, an entrepreneur and founding member of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a representative of Turkish tradesmen and craftsmen, and a Kemalist academic each commented on today's politics; the first resentful of secularist prejudice, the second aggrieved by current economic policy but nevertheless supporting Prime Minister Erdogan and the third concerned that AKP control of the parliament and presidency was undemocratic and a danger to the state. End summary.

THE ANATOLIAN MUSLIM - "THEY" DON'T REPRESENT "US"

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12. (C) Nureddin Nebati, 42, is a purveyor of fine children's clothes for those appearing in Istanbul's society pages. We met Nebati between buying trips to Rome and Paris. He is also a member of the board of MUSIAD (religiously-associated Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association), as well as the AKP Istanbul board. Nebati is clear about what he disdains in Turkey's secularist elite: he recounted a meeting in Rome in FM Gul's presence when Turkey's Ambassador told the Italian hosts that Turkey has three shortcomings: poverty, village mentality, and Islam. This frequently voiced sentiment regarding Islam shocks and angers AKP members. "This side of the Turkish state does not represent us. They are wrong to say such things," Nebati stated. Nebati stressed that being Muslim and Turkish does not mean support for Sharia law, he said. It means respect and honor for the Muslim faith as traditionally practiced in Turkey. (Note. He refers to a moderate, Sufi-inspired Sunni Islam common in Turkey. End note.) From his perspective, "everyone" in Turkey would be America's friend if the U.S. supported a woman's right to wear a headscarf in official settings.

TRADESMEN AND CRAFTSMEN: ECONOMY COULD BE BETTER BUT...

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13. (C) Suat Yalkin, head of the Union of Turkish Tradesmen and Craftsmen, is the 72-year old representative of small shop owners and craftsmen. Strongly pro-American, he recalled with emotion U.S. efforts during the Cold War to support Turkey's independence against Soviet-era pressure. The spokesman for hundreds of thousands of small businessmen made clear that AKP economic reform policies are hurting those he represents. Yalkin went into detail to describe protectionist measures accorded small business in the EU, noting that even though Turkey had to compete on price and quality, a huge disparity favoring European small businesses exists in the cost and outright availability of government loans, for example. Though the 1982 Constitution mandates incentives for small business, Yalkin claimed there were none

comparable to those the Europeans enjoy. And when an American-style supermarket opens, Yalkin says an average of 54 neighborhood corner stores close due to price competition.

He pitched a European-model fix: taxation of supermarkets at a higher rate and redistribution of that revenue to local markets, for instance.

¶4. (C) Confidently predicting small businessmen would oppose AKP, Yalkin professed not to understand why polls consistently show AKP winning a plurality in general elections. He allowed that tradesmen do not typically declare their opposition to AKP openly. Furthermore, he felt personally that given Turkey's overwhelmingly Muslim demographic, it was useless to get into who was better qualified to represent Muslims. There is no point in creating tension over secularity, he said. "All of us are nationalists...the fight is against poverty."

¶5. (C) Yalkin closed the meeting by confiding that Erdogan, when mayor of Istanbul, had asked for Yalkin's support for the rest of his political career. Though at the time Yalkin felt Erdogan needed refinement, his record of accomplishment for the city convinced him to give Erdogan his word. He wouldn't lend his support to a "Refah-type extremist," Yalkin said, but he would stick to his pledge to Erdogan.

COMPROMISE CHOICE FOR PRESIDENT?

¶6. (C) When Sabah newspaper recently reported Motherland Party (ANAVATAN) leader Erkan Mumcu had the perfect compromise candidate for president and that she was blond and from Istanbul, we were surprised to learn it was ardent secularist, Professor Deniz Aribogan. So was Aribogan. In

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the days before FM Gul's candidacy was announced, Aribogan told us AKP could name Turkey's next president but the "tipping point" would come if one party controlled all powers of the state following national parliamentary elections. It would be "undemocratic" if AKP both selected the next president and formed the next government without a coalition partner. Noting her own "fear" of the military, she said the "70 percent or so" of voters alienated from the AKP may demand some response from the military. The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) was entirely capable of turning out large and boisterous protests that could intimidate a government, she said.

¶7. (C) Aribogan took an enlightened approach to the question of headscarves in public saying it really did not matter - even for the president's wife - as long as it was neither a political statement nor a means of attacking the opposing side but solely a matter of personal religious expression. Turks do not want institutionalization of a "militant Islam" which Aribogan defined as direction of the state according to Koranic principles. Reflecting a sense of geopolitics popular with Turks, Aribogan said the U.S. should act to place Turkey in a powerful position in the Middle East. Aribogan said someone like Tayyip Erdogan could only become Prime Minister "in a country like Turkey" because of U.S. intervention, citing Erdogan's December 2002 White House meeting with President Bush during Abdullah Gul's interregnum as prime minister as evidence of this "intervention."

¶8. (C) Comment. Aribogan's comments track sentiments often repeated by Turkey's secular elite, and Nebati's complaints are typical of our AKP interlocutors. Secularist contacts often use "undemocratic" when "unrepresentative" might be a more accurate term. In their reverence for Kemalism, this elite maintains that the threat of a recidivist polity heading toward something other than strict separation of church (or mosque) and state is a grave danger. They see secularism, not necessarily democracy, as the means of protecting Turkey from becoming a theocratic state modeled on today's Iran. At the May 11 Brookings Institute/Sabancı

University event, former Turkish Ambassador to the United States Faruk Logoglu spoke in this vein when he vigorously contested the Economist magazine's recommendation that Turkey opt for democracy rather than secularism. End comment.

JONES